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ABSTRACT

It is possible to use writing assignments in college psychology courses as a means of teaching subject matter and writing without substantially increasing instructor workload. There are two sets of strategies for dealing with the problem of limited time and energy, one pertaining to the writing assignment itself, the other to evaluating such assignments. Short assignments offer alternatives to the term paper. In planning short assignments, instructors should be careful to determine the students' general writing level, students' knowledge level of psychology, and the skill and content objectives of the assignment. All these will affect subsequent decisions about length, focus, and types of assignments. A second way to save faculty time is to alter the traditional written method of assignment evaluation. Self-evaluations and peer evaluations provide useful feedback on student performance. Alternatively, evaluation may focus on the students' development in one particular subprocess of writing. There are also several strategies for saving time in the communication of student evaluations. Instructors should consider combinations of oral and written evaluations and group and individual evaluations. (LP)

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Student Writing in Courses: Specific Strategies for Minimizing Faculty Workload

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Student Writing in Courses: Specific Strategies
for Minimizing Faculty Workload

Interest in the issue of the nature and the extent of student writing in psychology courses is evident from relatively recent articles in Teaching of Psychology and from conference presentations. Calhoun and Selby (1979) pointed out that instructors in upper level psychology courses have been requiring fewer writing assignments because the level of competence in writing of the typical undergraduate student is very low. They proposed the development of a course, to be taught in the psychology department, that would focus on teaching students the skills of library research and of writing in the behavioral science. The availability of such a course would reduce the pressure on other psychology faculty to increase the number of writing assignments in their traditional courses.

Spiegel, Cameron, Evans, and Nodine (1980) agreed with Calhoun and Selby (1979) in terms of the lack of student competence in writing but disagreed with the solution of a separate course in writing. Instead, Spiegel and her colleagues (1980) recommended the integration of writing into existing psychology courses as a more efficient and effective way to teach writing and to teach psychology. They also claimed that writing requires active thinking and involvement with an issue and that "students can learn to expand, clarify, and organize their thinking through writing" (Spiegel et al, 1980, p. 242). The position that writing can contribute substantially to learning and thinking is supported by many other authors

(e.g. Emig, 1977; Bruner, 1971; Anderson, 1980; Lunsford, 1970; Walvoord, 1982; Odell, 1977; Luria, 1982).

Although I have a limited knowledge of effective means of teaching writing, I do require a variety of writing assignments in my psychology courses in the belief that this strategy will not only result in my students developing their writing skills but will also facilitate their understanding of concepts and principles in psychology. Fortunately, I have been supported in this effort by my faculty colleagues and by the policies and programs of my institution.

The institution with which I am affiliated places importance on the development of good writing skills by its students. Demonstrated proficiency in English in terms of several criteria is a specific admission requirement. Successful completion of an advanced college-level course in English composition is a degree requirement, and during their first year of study most students complete at least two courses in English composition. In addition, a writing laboratory, staffed by faculty and specially trained upperclass students, is available to students who need individual help beyond the assistance which they can obtain in their courses. The college also offers a faculty colloquium on student writing skills each semester to help any interested faculty member identify and evaluate student writing problems. Finally, the college encourages faculty to consult individually with the staff of the Writing Lab for assistance in improving their methods and skills in the evaluation

and development of student writing.

Despite institutional support for writing in psychology courses, other problems exist in implementing the "learning by writing" strategy. The most obvious of these problems arises from insufficient time available for instructors to read and evaluate a large number of lengthy written assignments. Before describing specific strategies for dealing with this problem, it is necessary to discuss the elements of the writing process itself, since one's understanding of that process affects the strategies employed.

Anderson (1980) describes a traditional model of the writing process which consists of three stages: pre-writing, writing, and editing. In the pre-writing stage, the writer decides what she or he wants to communicate. The actual text is generated in the writing stage. The editing stage involves reworking the text to make it a more effective communication. Although useful, this model seems to imply that writing is a process that follows a rigid and irreversible sequence.

A model of the writing process which is more useful, in my opinion, is one developed by Hayes and Flower (1980), based on their analysis of writing protocols. Their model, described in the handout entitled "Structure of the writing process," takes into consideration the characteristics of the writer and what they designate as the "task environment" (Hayes & Flower, 1980, p. 11). The model also identifies subprocesses of the writing process and the dynamic

interaction of those subprocesses.

The function of the planning process--which includes the subprocesses of generating, organizing, and goal-setting--is to take information from long-term memory and from the task environment and to use that information to establish goals and to develop a writing plan which will help in the production of a text to meet those goals. Under the guidance of the writing plan, the translating process acts to produce language which corresponds to information now in the working memory of the writer. In the reviewing process, the writer attempts to improve the quality of the text produced in the translating process by detecting and correcting weaknesses in the mechanics and effectiveness of expression. The reviewing process also involves an evaluation of the extent to which the text accomplishes the goals of the writer (Hayes & Flower, 19[illegible], p. 12).

Let us now turn to our presentation of strategies for dealing with the problem of limited time (and energy) to devote to student writing in psychology courses. These strategies are of two basic types: those which pertain to the writing assignment and those which pertain to the evaluation of writing assignments.

During my years as a student enrolled in psychology courses, the vast majority of writing assignments--if any were required--consisted of "term papers," submitted at the end of the semester, and written responses to essay examinations. As a teacher, I followed this same pattern of assignments. My stereotyped thinking frequently resulted

in either a veritable "mountain" of papers to comment on and grade at the end of the semester, or feelings of guilt when I did not require 15 to 20 page papers because of the large number of students in a course. Discussions with colleagues and some reading in the area of "writing across the curriculum" have convinced me that there are alternative assignments which are not only acceptable but which are probably more effective in meeting my goals that students learn psychology and improve their writing. Walvoord (1982) has pointed out that the substitution for the traditional lengthy term paper with shorter pieces of various types of writing may improve both the writing and the learning in the course without increasing the instructor's workload.

Before selecting writing assignments for a course, it is helpful to determine the level of general writing skills of the students enrolled in the course, as well as their previously acquired knowledge of psychology. If these data are not available from other sources, a one-page or two-page expository essay on a basic concept in psychology or an in-class assignment to summarize a lecture which you have just presented will probably yield a reasonably reliable sample for an assessment.

It is also necessary to identify clearly the functions which you believe that writing will fulfill in your course. Naturally, these functions will vary from one course to another, as well as from one group of students to another. Traditionally, the primary function has

been to provide a basis for evaluating students' mastery of course material, so that they can be assigned grades. However, writing assignments can also serve to help students develop general writing skills or specific writing skills that are commonly used in psychology, e.g. expressing in words, numerical data resulting from statistical analyses. To illustrate, you may wish to use writing assignments to determine the extent to which students understand specific readings in the course or to measure their affective response to course content, or to learn the results of their research in an experimental psychology laboratory. You may be able to identify other such functions for your courses.

A decision about the writing assignments in a course should also be guided by the specific elements of the writing process which you wish to develop in your students such as planning, idea generating, and so forth. Furthermore, the amount of both your time and theirs which you believe should be spent on the assignments should also be considered.

We have been pointing out that decisions should be made about issues such as the students' knowledge of psychology, the students' writing skills, the functions of the assignment, the focus on specific aspects of the writing process, and the time available for writing and teaching. The choices made about these matters will affect subsequent decisions about the number, length, locus, and types of writing assignments as well as decisions about how the assignments are to be evaluated.

With regard to the number and length of assignments, Walvoord (1980) refers to research which indicates the sheer amount of writing is not as important in improving writing as is coaching of students in the process of writing. More is not necessarily better!

Obviously, writing tasks can be assigned for completion in class or out of class. Traditionally, the most common in-class assignments have been to have students respond to essay examinations or take notes on material presented in class. Such assignments are acceptable if they meet the criteria about function, time, etc. described previously. However, other in-class assignments can include such tasks as a one paragraph, or one page, response to class material. Such responses can take the form of personal applications of concepts, or integration of the present material with concepts or principles learned previously.

Out-of-class assignments, in addition to the common library research paper, can include many other types of writing. The choice of the type of writing should be governed by the factors mentioned previously but can include such tasks as a comparison of different definitions of a concept in psychology, or a description of behavior observed in a natural setting, or the procedures used in an experiment. If the focus of the assignment is on the development of skills in the planning phase of the writing process, perhaps an outline or a flow chart will suffice to demonstrate that learning is taking place. Rather than requiring a report in prose form, a sequentially ordered, annotated

bibliography may serve the same function. A detailed list of possible topics for research or applications of a psychological principle may contribute to the development of the generating subprocess as described in the Hayes and Flower model (1980). Examples of several assignments have been distributed and a number of other sources contain a variety of writing assignments which could be adapted to courses in psychology (e.g. Spiegel et al, 1980; Walvoord, 1982; Coles, 1974; Elbow, 1973).

By becoming more flexible in terms of the type of writing assigned, the teacher may also be able to vary the number and length of assignments in different courses. A few, brief assignments--instead of a term paper--in a large introductory course may allow the faculty member to devote more time and energy to developing writing and problem-solving skills at a more sophisticated level with the students in a smaller, more advanced level psychology course. Techniques for teaching writing may be found in recent publications by Maimon, Belcher, Hearn, Nodine, and O'Connor (1981), by Flower (1981), and by Walvoord (1982).

Summarizing this basic point, learning psychology through writing and the development of writing skills can be accomplished by many different types of writing assignments which may also vary in number and length, depending upon the characteristics of the students, the nature of the course, the purposes of the writing, and the time and energy of the instructor. Variations in the

writing assignment may also be used to teach elements of writing more effectively than the traditional "term paper," while not increasing the workload of the faculty member.

Before leaving our discussion of writing assignments, it is important to mention a rather obvious, but often ignored, technique for minimizing faculty workload related to student writing. This technique involves the use of a detailed written statement of the specifications of the writing assignment. These specifications should include at least a description of the genre; topic (whether assigned or limited by the instructor, or determined by the student); the intended audience; the expected length; the editorial style to be used; the criteria for evaluation to be used; the impact on the course grade; and the deadlines for submissions of drafts and final copy. Obviously, such detailed specifications are not necessary for all types of writing assignment. However, the more information about the assignment which can be supplied in writing by the instructor, the less time is spent answering questions about it.

Another way in which it is possible to save faculty time and energy while still using writing assignments in psychology courses is to break away from the traditional method of evaluation in which the instructor makes notations in red ink of each problem or error in the ubiquitous end-of-term papers and then returns the corrected papers at the beginning of the next term--if the

students are available and/or sufficiently interested to pick them up. There are other approaches to evaluation which seem to be more effective, and less costly in terms of faculty time and energy.

Methods of evaluation can be varied at least in terms of who is conducting the evaluation, the frequency and the extent of detail of the evaluation, the focus of the evaluation, the stage in the writing process at which it is conducted, and how the evaluation is communicated to the students. In the time remaining, let us briefly examine each of these possible variations.

Most faculty members whom I know, personally evaluate each paragraph of each writing assignment submitted by their students. If they use help in the evaluation, it is from graduate assistants--who, of course, are not available in undergraduate institutions. Only a few of my colleagues use advanced-level undergraduate students. Even fewer consider the possibility of evaluation by either the student writer or by the peers of the writer, perhaps because we equate "evaluation" with "grading."

Beaven (1977) recommends the technique of "self evaluation" in conjunction with more traditional methods. She explains that student writers can learn to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing as well as to identify those elements of an assignment for which they need the help of the instructor. Students can be encouraged to engage formally in this self evaluation process by having them submit both the original and the self-revised drafts of the assignment and rewarding any evident improvement. This

strategy saves faculty time, especially if it is used with original and self-revised outlines of an assignment or when an outline is the assignment.

Faculty time can also be saved by the use of a system known as "peer evaluation." Maimon et al (1981), Beaven (1977), Elbow (1973), and Walvoord (1982), among others, encourage the use of this technique and provide guidelines for students to use in evaluating the assignments of their classmates. Typically, peer evaluation involves the oral or written presentation of an assignment by a student to a group of four or five classmates who respond orally or in writing either immediately or within a short period of time. The problems with effective communication by the writer can be identified and suggestions for improvement obtained with minimal faculty involvement and more rapid feedback. Research, cited by Beaven (1977), indicates that peer evaluation can result in improvement in theme-writing ability which is equal to, or greater than, the improvement which occurs from evaluation only by teachers. The technique also provides the peer evaluators themselves with experience in the reviewing-editing subprocess of writing. Some faculty require the evaluation to be submitted to them and assign a grade to the peer evaluator. (Here we have an instance of an evaluator evaluating the evaluation of evaluators.)

Faculty may also reduce their writing workload by varying the frequency and/or the extent of the evaluation. It is not intrinsically

evil to evaluate only a previously designated sample of assignments submitted by a student, e.g. only two, randomly selected, assignments out of five submitted. These two can be given greater weight in the designation of a grade, with lesser weight given to those submitted but not evaluated by the instructor. However, this technique may result in a problem of poor morale with some students.

This variation may be effectively combined with a variation in the extent of detail included in the evaluation. A minutely detailed, or atomistic, evaluation which attempts to identify every single error in a paper may not only overload the faculty member but may also be ineffective because it results in cognitive processing "overload" and frustration in the student. Perhaps less detail will be more effective! For example, Cooper (1977) describes a holistic evaluation approach which utilizes a rating scale and which he claims can result in inter-rater reliabilities of .90 in terms of ranking papers submitted by students.

Another point which we are making here is that an evaluation need not encompass all of the material submitted by the student. The evaluation can focus on the extent to which the student has developed in a particular subprocess in writing, without the evaluation addressing other aspects of the writing, e.g. generating, but not planning; or spelling, but not punctuation. Beaven (1977) points out the efficacy of this "goal setting" approach. The time commitment

of the faculty member can also be reduced by evaluating in detail only a randomly selected, percentage sample of pages of an assignment. My students have responded favorably to my use of variations of "focused" evaluation and "sampled" evaluation, especially when it resulted in a more prompt return of preliminary drafts of the assignment.

Evaluation should also take into consideration what has been mentioned previously about writing as a process. To provide students with evaluations only for completed papers submitted at the end of a term may help them to improve their thinking and writing in future courses, but such a strategy would seem to be less effective than providing feedback during the various steps in the process of writing assignments for the present course. It is also beneficial for the student to experience the participation in developing an improved product. Evaluations of progress during the process need not be time-consuming if these evaluations are holistic and/or focused and/or sampled--and if they are communicated efficiently.

Let us briefly attend to this variable of communicating to the student the results of the evaluation. Logically, such communications can be individual, or in a group, or both; oral, or written, or both; taped, or face-to-face, or both; and explicit, or coded, or both. I urge you to experiment with various combinations of these subsets of communication--especially if your present way of communicating your

evaluation involves comments, laboriously written in red ink, about every misplaced comma, but the evaluation is available to the student only after the course has been completed. There are feasible alternatives. Have you considered a five-minute conference with a student to share your response to an intermediate draft of a paper, or ordered bibliography, or other type of assignment, and had the student tape that five-minute exchange of ideas? You might even have the tape submitted with the final draft of the assignment, to learn whether--or how well--the student incorporated your suggestions for improvement. As was mentioned previously, Cooper (1977) describes rating scales which can be used to communicate efficiently the evaluation of an assignment.

Another time-saving technique is the use of a written code to communicate your evaluation. Such a code can involve abbreviations or unique symbols to designate common errors that are described on a handout distributed with the returned assignment.

Perhaps a few minutes of precious class time can be used to describe orally a small number of common problems which you have identified and designated cryptically or individual papers. Another group communication can take the form of placing examples of well completed assignments from previous classes on reserve in your office or the library. Students can use them as models of form, organization, and so forth, as well as using them to learn in concrete terms about your criteria and method of evaluation.

In summary, it is possible to use writing assignments as a means of teaching psychology and writing without a substantial increase in workload. Varying the frequency, length, and type of assignment and also varying elements of the evaluation procedure are two basic ways to attain the goals of "learning while writing."

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